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EDITOR'S NOTE

COVER ART
Standing from left, Edward Joon Cho, Robert Hanrey Schorr, and Haidee Brynn Manibusan, and, kneeling from left, Fiona Marielle Bucalig, John Francis Santiago, and Catherine Magat pose for TAGA *Sports* during a photo shoot at the Oleai Sports Complex Field.

Photography by
Jessie Pagsinohin

Wow! Second edition already! I could scarcely believe that what was just a gleam in the eye of our company president a mere seven months ago is now on its second edition! Who'd have thought that when I took on the job of being the editor for the *Saipan Tribune* would also lead to being the editor of the first and only sports magazine in the CNMI? Thank God I have awesome, awesome people who help me pull off this improbable and near-impossible feat!

First off, happy New Year to everyone! 2010 was a banner year for sports in the Commonwealth but 2011 looks to be an even greater year, mostly because of the promise it holds for the islands' sports community. Each new year brings with it a mulligan, the promise of surpassing oneself and the chance to start all over again and do even greater than last year.

For this edition of TAGA *Sports*, we are as Janus, the two-faced Greek god of beginnings and endings, of time, looking at both the past and the future of CNMI sports. We look at some of the up and coming stars and those at the twilight of their sports careers.

Thea Minor, currently the best female junior tennis player of the CNMI, is one such example of a rising star, one that holds the promise of bringing even more glory for the Commonwealth in years to come. Our football writer, Catherine Anderson, sees glints of diamonds in the rough in our youthful soccer players who are beginning to show promise in the five virtues of a superior football player.

Francisco "Tan Ko" Palacios, the unparalleled archivist of CNMI baseball lore, brings us to the other end of the spectrum, showing the new generation how it's done. Old school but one that has stood the test of time. "Road Runner Bunny" Ketson Kabiriel has signified his intention to retire this year and he is ready to pass on the mantle to the next best CNMI marathon runner.

Mark Rabago's feature on the sorry state of the CNMI men's basketball is an in-depth examination of what ails the sport. More importantly, it maps out the steps that could be taken to make the CNMI a powerhouse in this sport. Roselyn Monroyo takes a look at one sport that could be a gold medal bounty for the CNMI in future meets: wrestling. And why not? We have great mixed martial artists here and Greco-Roman wrestling is not such a long stretch.

We hope you love this latest edition of TAGA *Sports* as much as we loved cobbling it together. Again, for comments, violent reactions, criticisms, and suggestions for future issues, don't hesitate to shoot us an email at editor@tagasports.com and we'd be sure to consider them in future editions of the magazine.

JAYVEE VALLEJERA
Editor

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TAGA SPORTS

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SCOREBOARD

At a young age, Thea Minor is already blowing the competition out of the water, or in this case, the tennis courts.

10

20

Football starts 'em young but even at such a tender age, some of these up-and-coming superstars are beginning to show the five signs of a superior player.

6 With the expanding array of sports activities to choose from comes a widening lineup of shoes to fit any activity.

14 TAGA *Sports* examines what ails the CNMI's men's basketball and the steps that need to be taken to make the Northern Marianas a powerhouse in this sport.

18 Two hoops players from Saipan and Chuuk tell how it's like playing for collegiate basketball in Manila.

22 Eight questions for Ketson Jack Kabiriel and why he always runs without a shirt on.

19

Gyms? We give you a lineup of your possible choices, from one that offers the barest minimum, to those that mean serious business when it comes to getting you fit.

24 With so many mixed martial arts events going on, it is a puzzler that the CNMI has no formal wrestling program. Here is a sport that could be a potential gold mine for the CNMI in international competitions.

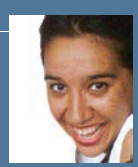
26 Francisco "Tan Ko" Palacios retired from baseball scorekeeping in 2006 and the sport's recording of statistics has never been the same.

WRITERS BLOC

ROSELYN MONROYO
Coming from a country where baseball is not popular, Roselyn was lost when she first covered a baseball game on Saipan in 2005. However, people like "Tan Ko," Roque Celis, and Tony Rogolifoi slowly made life easier for her, on and off the baseball field. A visit to Tan Ko's C.K. residence for an interview for the magazine's second issue brought back memories about the pains and gains she experienced while figuring out how a score sheet is read and interpreted.

MARK RABAGO
A lifelong Ginebra fan in the Philippine Basketball Association, Mark Rabago's nickname is Sonny. His mom gave him the nickname because she is a die-hard Sonny Jaworski fan. Jaworski is the Living Legend of Philippine basketball and played professionally until being elected senator at the tender age of 52. Mark's only claim to fame in the basketball court is being hailed 3-point king in the 2002 Tan Holdings Basketball League.

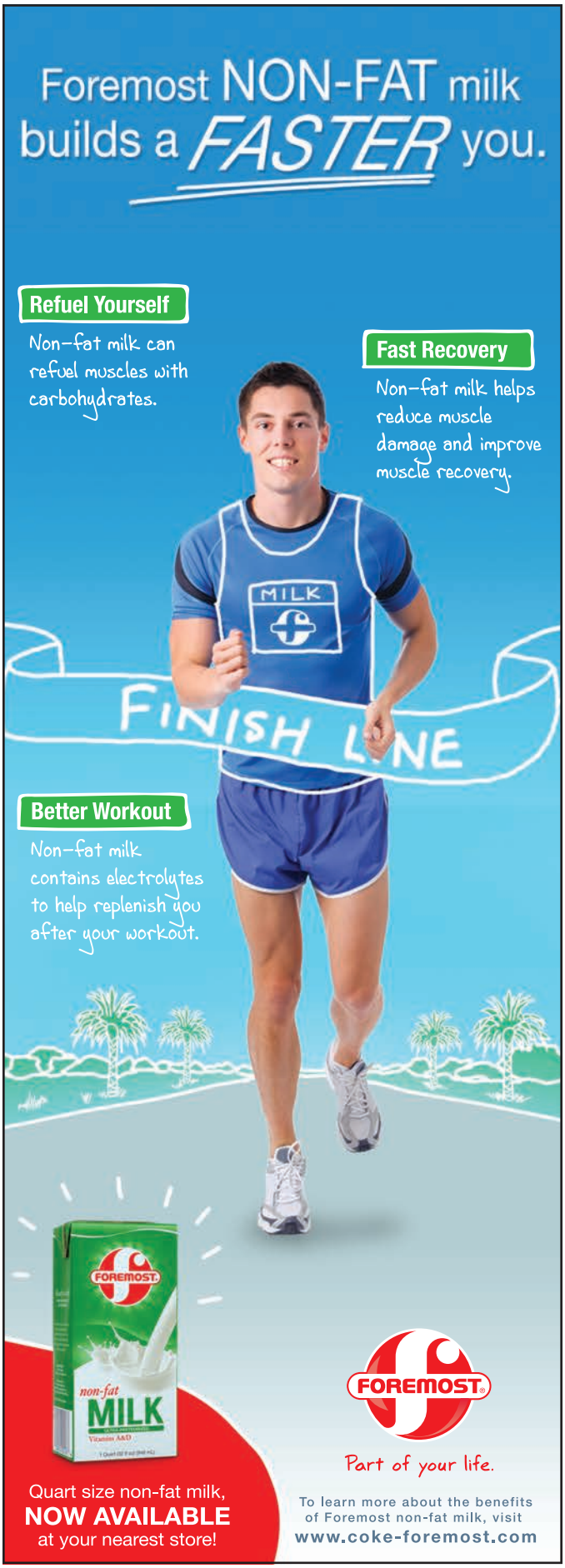
CLARISSA DAVID
Contributing a story for TAGA *Sports* was the last thing on Clarissa David's mind when she joined *Saipan Tribune* a few months ago. Clarissa covers the community and lifestyle beats for the paper but for the January edition of TAGA *Sports* gives a short roundup of local gyms.



CATHERINE P. ANDERSON
Catherine first learned of the five fundamental "S"s of football from Northern Marianas football pioneer coach Perry Lo. She found inspiration for her article watching matches of young Under-8 and Under-11 players in fall 2010. She claims Sportsmanship as her personal superpower on the pitch.

WALTER SUTHERLAND
Walter started at the *Saipan Tribune* as a community reporter in early March of last year. He joined the sports team after the expansion of the department last summer. He likes covering baseball, mixed martial arts, and basketball, but enjoys all kinds of sports. He takes a lot of pictures during his coverage and tries to keep them on file. If contacted through email, he is willing to share them with the public.

JONATHAN PEREZ
Jonathan got his first regular writing job with the *Philippine Post*. He then became the courtside reporter for ABS-CBN Sports and later wrote web content for ABS-CBN's PinoyCentral website, followed by a stint with ABS-CBN's news website. Jonathan was a sports reporter on Saipan for almost four years before landing a regular post at GMANews.TV, where he currently works as the sports section's editor.



Nice job!

Thanks for the magazine. I was impressed with the nice articles. You all did a great job. May I suggest something historical as well as the latest in sports in each issue. And maybe talk to Bob Coldeen for either the beginning of baseball on Saipan or the first Micronesian Games. You can interview Frank Rosario, he did a lot for sports in the beginning and was part of our Micronesian Games and did numerous article in 1990 of all aspects of sports leading to the Games. Again, nice job!

Bill Sakovich
via email

Long overdue

The idea of a sports magazine is long overdue. TAGA *Sports* magazine offers another opportunity to showcase our much-deserving athletes and their accomplishments; and also to highlight the different sports programs that are ongoing. This magazine will also play a big role in the marketing of our islands.

In the future, I would like to see the magazine feature highlights of other sporting events, a schedule of events for the whole year, an article on the Sports Hall of Fame from inception, the TSL Foundation/NMASA Athletes' Awards Program, upcoming international competitions, and Tan Holdings-sponsored "2010 Annual Athletes' Banquet" info. Perhaps you could also ask the different sports federations to submit articles.

Rose Igitol
via email

Special memories

I would just like to thank and congratulate you for the successful launching of TAGA *Sports*! It was awesome and the magazine itself is very beautiful! It is also an honor for us that Rezne was included in the first edition of the magazine.

The 7th Micronesian Games brought a lot of special memories and milestones not only to Rezne but to me and the whole family as well, especially in our relationship with God. After everything that we have gone through as a family, God showed His sovereignty above all things when Rezne won those medals and was eventually chosen as the Top Athlete of the Games. Who would have thought that TAGA *Sports* will be born to conclude Rezne's stint with the CNMI swim team?

Rezne is extending his warmest appreciation to all of you for your undying support for him and the sport. May his good head (and heart) continue to rule over his awesome shoulders! Thanks again! God bless you and your new magazine!

Millet Wong
via email

Email letters to the editor to editor@tagasports.com or mail to PMB 34, P.O. Box 10001, Saipan MP 96950. Submissions to TAGA *Sports* must include the writer's name, village address (no P.O. boxes), and daytime phone or mobile number. Letters may be edited for length and clarity and may be published or used in any medium. All submissions become the property of the publication and will not be returned.

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Soles for your soul

WALTER SUTHERLAND
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

These days, Cinderella's deal with just a pair of glass slippers won't cut it. With the expanding array of sports activities to choose from comes a widening lineup of shoes to fit any activity—from the gel-cushioned footwear for running, to the flexible toe-gripping footwear for rock climbing. Here are the latest footgear available on island, starting with the soon-to-come Vibram FiveFinger that aims to give you that running-on-bare-feet experience. »

WHERE TO GO

ATHLETE'S FOOT

The Athlete's Foot Of Saipan has two locations: in Garapan and Susupe. They offer top of the line shoes and sports equipment. Athlete's Foot carries popular brands such as Nike, Jordan, Lugz, Adidas, Asics, K-Swiss, Saucony, Converse, New Balance, Scott and Speedo merchandise. This store offers the broadest product line of shoes on Saipan, and a large selection of training apparel, bags, and sports accessories.

PAYLESS SHOE SOURCE

Payless Shoe Source in San Jose offers a variety of casual fitness shoes, including name brands such as Champion, Above The Rim, Airwalk, American Eagle and Peds; all priced affordably.

SKECHERS

Skechers in Garapan carries a multitude of sporty casual shoes, including other brands such as Zoo York and Echo. It has an array of men and women's Shape-Ups shoes and Tone-Ups sandals. The new Shape Ups Resistance model is expected to arrive on island soon.

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Retail at $75-$125

Skechers

Shape Ups: Skechers offers an impressive assortment of different Shape Ups colors and styles. Shape Ups are designed to tone muscles, improve posture, burn calories and promote weight loss, improve blood circulation and reduce knee-ankle joint stress. They are made with leather upper with breathable mesh, removable sockliner, polyurethane midsole, high rebound kinetic wedge for shock absorption and a durable rubber outsole.
Men's ($102-$129)
Women's ($93-$108)

Tone Ups: Similar to Shape-Ups shoes, Tone-Ups sandals are also available in a number of colors and styles.
Women's ($43-$51)

Payless

Champion, Pace Fitness Athletic - Men's (White-Navy and Black-Grey), Women's (White-Silver and White-Light Blue): Features dynamic Rocker Bottom technology that encourages muscle toning, Mid-foot Overlays for stability, dual-density EVA midsole, mesh upper and rubber outsole.
$53.99-$58.99 (M), $43.99 (W)

BASKETBALL

Payless

Above the Rim, Rise Basketball Athletic – Men's-Kid's (White-Navy and Black-White): Constructed with faux leather upper, breathable mesh lining, cushiony collar and non-marking, skid resistant outsole.
$48.99 (M), $32.99 (K)

Athlete's Foot

Jordan, Air Jordan 13 Retro – Men's-Kid's (French Blue-University Blue-Flint Grey-White): Made with quality leather upper, rubber outsole, Phylon midsole, hidden lacing system, with heel and forefoot Zoom Air units.
$119.99 (M), $104.99 (K)

RUNNING

Payless

Champion, Stride Fitness Athletic – Men's (Black, White, White-Bronze, Black-Purple), Women's (White-Silver, White-Pink, Black Pink): Features Air Traverse Toning technology that transfers air between the heel and forefoot, breathable mesh lining and durable rubber outsole. **$32.99**

Athlete's Foot

Asics, Gel 3020 – Men's (White-Black-Royal): Equipped with Asics' patented Impact Guiding System, "Twist" Gel Cushioning, gender-specific Dyanmic Forefoot Cradle and Solyte mid-sole; weight 12.3 oz. **$149.99**

Asics, Gel Foundation 9 – Women's (White-Lightning-Electric Blue): Equipped with rear and fore-foot Gel Cushioning, ComforDry sock line, SpEVA midsole, DUO Max Support System and Personal Heel-Fit foam; weight 10.7 oz. **$129.99**
**The U.S. military encourages service members to wear (gel-cushioned) Asics brand shoes.*

BASEBALL

Athlete's Foot

Adidas, Triple Star 7 – (Black White): Features traditional cleated look with AdiTUFF Toe, perforated forefoot, synthetic leather upper, CMEVA midsole, fold over tongue and high traction rubber outsole; weight (Men's) 14.4 oz.
Men's $64.99, Women's $54.99, Kids $44.99

SOCCER

Athlete's Foot

Adidas, Predator XTRX-FG - Men's (Black-White-Blue-Gray): Constructed with full-grain leather upper, synthetic lining, molded EVA midsole, TraXion FG outsole for more grip on the ball and a revolutionary Powerspine internal chassis uses to enhance shooting power; weight 11.4 oz.
$59.99

Payless

Champion, Striker Cleat – Men's-Kid's (Black): This product is a multi-sport cleat for soccer, baseball, softball and football. Made with lightweight faux leather upper, breathable mesh lining, padded insole/collar and rubber outsole with 12 durable cleats.
$27.99 (M), $21.99 (K)

TENNIS

Athlete's Foot

K-Swiss, Speedster Tennis – Men's (White-Navy), Women's (White- Royal): Made with synthetic leather and mesh upper, EVA sockliner and Aosta II rubber sole. **$104.99**

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Tennis in T. Minor

Thea Minor is not your typical teenager—just the CNMI's best women's junior tennis player.

At an age when she was supposed to be playing Barbie dolls with fellow 8-year-olds, Thea Minor was already playing tennis with people twice her age.

MARK RABAGO
Associate Editor

Birthday parties at McDonald's also took a backseat to tournaments at the American Memorial Park.

And while her classmates pined for field trips to the Saipan Zoo or the Botanical Garden, she was already training her sights to compete in Fiji.

DVDs of Grand Slams took the place of teenybopper videos on her to-watch list. In lieu of stuffed toys, more than a hundred tennis trophies jostled for space on the cabinet inside her room, that is, until her until her parents moved them out and had a trophy shelf built in the family living room.

Thea Minor is not your typical teenager—just the CNMI's best women's junior tennis player.

TAGA *Sports* caught up with Thea during a recent training session at the place where it all started and where she continues to hone her craft—the AMP tennis courts. A brief drizzle had halted practice and she, along with a handful of 6- to 8-year-old tennis beginners, retreated to the covered bleachers to wait for the courts to dry.

There, the group milled around a book Thea was reading and it wasn't hard to understand why the young tennis prodigy could easily connect with girls six years her junior. The first time Thea picked up a tennis racquet was when she was around that same age. Born on Dec. 11, 1995, she was 7 years old and a second grader at Grace Christian Academy when she began playing.

You can say the Saipan Southern High School student grew up around the sport as her parents—Boyet, an engineer, and Joy, a full-time housewife—are active in the local tennis scene and are quite capable tennis players themselves.

She admits that she took up tennis because her parents played it. However, that was not the only reason. »

ON COURT
- **Current height:** 4'11"
- **Current weight:** 107 lbs
- **Shoe size:** 7 1/2 or 8
- **Favorite racquet brand:** Babolat
- **Favorite tennis apparel:** Adidas
- **Favorite drink during matches:** Water and Life Water/Vitamin Water

OFF COURT
- **Village:** Lower Navy Hill
- **Favorite food:** Filipino, American, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and Chamorro food
- **Favorite movie:** Anything that is horror, action, and funny
- **Places would like to see:** France, London, United States, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and other ancient places.

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"It was one of the reasons [them playing tennis] but I also wanted to play the sport. They influenced me to get into the sport somewhat," she said.

Like all beginners, Thea started by bouncing tennis balls off the AMP wall next to the covered bleachers. Months shy of her eighth birthday she was already joining local tournaments.

"At first I thought it was pretty hard but after the years went by I started to appreciate tennis more. I think it's a really fun sport because I get to play with friends and play doubles with all kinds of people—adults and kids. So it could really be challenging," she said as her girl friends giggled in the background.

Thea went on to dominate her age group and when she didn't have any challenges left in the girls 10-and-under, her mother made her join the boys 10-and-under bracket.

In the first boys 10-and-under tournament she joined, Thea went all the way and won the championship. She would eventually graduate to the 14-and-under boys and dominate that age group as well. Girls 18-and-under divisions soon became her cup of tea and just last summer, she won the 2010 DFS Micronesian Tennis Championships women's open singles championship.

With her prodigious talent, Thea was a staple in the CNMI's North Pacific Qualifying teams in the Pacific Oceania Junior Championships.

During her half decade stint in the POJC, she barged into the semis a couple of times and this year made her debut in the ultra competitive girls 18-and-under division of the International Tennis Federation-organized tournament at the Robin Mitchell Regional Training Centre in Lautoka, Fiji.

A couple of years back, Thea was also a member of the Pacific Oceania touring team that took part in tournaments in New Caledonia and New Zealand.

Her bounty from the 2008 South Pacific trip included doubles championships in the Auckland Christmas Tournament and the Poverty Bay East Coast Ray White Junior Championship, not to mention a runner-up finish in the singles division of the latter.

She also competed in Australia for the first time in 2009 and got the additional treat of watching the 2010 Australian Open in person.

"That was my most memorable experience in tennis because not only was I able to watch professional tennis players but I also played with good players. It was also my first time to play on real grass. It was a good experience and in January I can't wait to go back and win more matches," she beamed.

Her best showing in early this year's Land Down Under Tour came from a tournament in Wodonga, where she made it all the way to the semifinals of the girls 14-and-under singles.

This month, Thea will once again compete in Australia and she is aiming to improve her results from last year. She said being a year older and her exposure to older age brackets in Fiji and at home has made her a better player.

Earlier this summer, Thea ruled the U18 division of the North Pacific Qualifying Tournament, clinching a slot on the North Team that eventually won the overall championship in the 2010 Pacific Oceania Junior Championships.

At 4'11" and 107 lbs, Minor is not a physically dominating athlete. But what she lacks in height and heft, she more than makes up with her tenacity, all-around game, and her unparalleled will to win on the court.

Just ask Gene Ridgway, coach at the Robin Mitchell Regional Tennis Training Centre.

"Thea is a gritty, competitive player with a good ground game and solid mentality. [She] is tough to beat as she plays consistently from the back of the court with few unforced errors," he said.

Ridgway said the strongest part of Thea's game is her consistency from the baseline and her mental attitude.

"She makes very few easy mistakes, and is mentally tough for the whole match. She, however, needs to improve her net play and finishing shots, and her physical speed, strength, and conditioning," he added.

Thea said her success at a very young age in the sport wouldn't have been possible without the help of a multitude of players, coaches, and tennis administrators.

"There were many people who helped shape up my tennis game, from the people I trained with from different places such as New Caledonia and Fiji, from the people on Saipan I play with at the American Memorial Park, and also the Micro Games training I did from November to July this year," she said.

Thea also thanked her parents, who have been her coaches from the very beginning, for giving her the opportunity to excel in something she truly enjoys.

Aside from tennis, Thea swims competitively and is in fact part of the Tsunami Saipan Swimming Center team.

And, according to her mother, that is by design to help her tennis game.

"Thea practices tennis three hours daily every weekdays and four hours during weekends. She also swims twice a week to help develop her stamina," said her mother.

Thea also plays the clarinet and is such a voracious reader that it's not unusual to see her sitting on the bleachers reading her favorite book while waiting for tennis matches to end at the AMP tennis courts.

Like teenagers her age, Minor's dreams are simple—to finish high school and go to college. She also wants to maximize her talents in tennis.

"My plans in the future is to finish high school, work hard in tennis and in my studies, and maybe later on try going pro…if it happens. For college, I want to have a tennis scholarship from the States so I can join a tennis team and study there at the same time," she said.

It's an aspiration her parents readily share with their daughter.

"Our dream for Thea is for her to finish college and have decent work. There are plans for her to train in Fiji for a few months next year. We hope Thea goes to college in the States under a tennis scholarship," they said.

With her attitude and natural talent plus support from her parents, the sky is the limit for Thea. TS

SHE SAID, SHE SAID
Thea Minor's Top 10 Championships

1 2007 - WAIKATO BAY TOURNAMENT - GIRLS 12 UNDER SINGLES (NEW ZEALAND): CHAMPION

According to Thea: It was my first tournament outside of Saipan where I became champion.

According to mom: At the age of 10 years and 11 months, Thea traveled by herself from the Philippines to New Zealand. This was the first time she left Saipan without her mom and her coach. When Thea won this tournament, all her hard work paid off.

2 2006 - COCONUT CLASSIC TOURNAMENT - BOYS 10 UNDER SINGLES - CHAMPION

According to Thea: It was my first time playing with the boys since I was undefeated in the girls. I wanted a challenge so I played in that division and became champion after beating all the boys.

According to mom: I allowed Thea to join this tournament because there's not much competition in the girls 10-under division. In the semifinals she played against Raffy Jones and went down 0-3, she came back and won the game. Later that day she played against Christian Miller in the finals and captured the boys' 10-and-under title.

3 2006 - AON TENNIS TENNIS TOURNAMENT - WOMEN'S 3.0 SINGLES - CHAMPION

According to Thea: It was my first time to play in the adults' tournament and I became champion.

According to mom: I wanted to expose Thea to a more competitive level, so I let her play in the women's 3.0 singles. The first set was very close with a tiebreaker, but she finished the second set easily. From this experience it gave Thea more confidence and she learned how to play with adults.

4 2004 - FALL CLASSIC TOURNAMENT - 10 UNDER SINGLES - CHAMPION

According to Thea: It was the first tournament I ever played where I won my first title.

According to mom: This is the tournament that gave Thea her first singles trophy. At that time no one believed she could win the title. This game was like David vs. Goliath. Thea challenged a top seeded player and won.

5 2006 - NORTH PACIFIC QUALIFYING - 12 UNDER SINGLES - CHAMPION

According to Thea: This was my first NPQ held in Guam and I went to the finals and became champion.

According to mom: I didn't expect Thea to win this tournament because she played the best player in the North Pacific. Winning this tournament gave Thea a chance to play against the best player of the West Pacific and East Pacific.

6 2009 - 29TH DUTY FREE TOURNAMENT - WOMEN'S OPEN SINGLES - CHAMPION

According to Thea: This was the first time I beat Lila Mailman. I always lost to her ever since I started playing in the girls 18-and-under at the age of 11.

According to mom: Both players played a very competitive game in the first set, but later on Thea prevailed because of her physical strength and determination.

7 2009 - IST TAN HOLDINGS TENNIS CLASSIC - WOMEN'S OPEN SINGLES - CHAMPION

According to Thea: This was the inaugural Tan Holdings tournament and it marked the first time I beat Vivian Lee and in the finals no less.

According to mom: In this tournament, Thea was playing Vivian Lee for the first time. During the first set Thea was down 0-4. She came back and won 7-5. In the second set it was 2-1 and Vivian retired. This match helped Thea improve her mental game.

8 2010 - P.I.C TENNIS TOURNAMENT - MIXED OPEN - CHAMPION

According to Thea: This was my first championship in mixed doubles with Todd Montgomery. We had played mixed doubles in the past but we would always finish third.

According to mom: After winning the first set, Thea and Todd were down 2-5 in the second set, but because of their strategy and consistency, they won the second set 7-5, and beat the tandem of Peter Loyola and Lydia Tan in the finals. I want Thea to work with an experienced player like Todd so that she will learn more techniques and strategy in playing doubles and mixed doubles.

9 2010 - P.I.C TENNIS TOURNAMENT - WOMEN'S DOUBLES - CHAMPION

According to Thea: Cleofe Santos had been my doubles partner since I was little and we became partners again and won in the finals against Vivian Lee and her mom Sally.

According to mom: It was the first time that Thea and Cleofe played three sets against the mother-and-daughter team of Vivien and Sally Lee. This game tested their partnership to handle pressure. Their longtime partnership and knowing each other inside and outside the court eventually prevailed.

10 2010 - 29TH DUTY FREE TOURNAMENT - MEN'S 4.0 SINGLES - CHAMPION

According to Thea: It's been many years since I last played in the boys/men's division and I played the men's 4.0 in this tournament and became champion.

According to mom: Playing in the men's level is different, it is more competitive and you have to earn every point. Winning this tournament gave Thea more confidence to compete in the men's level.

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The sick man

We have GREAT PLAYERS, GOOD COACHES, SEVERAL COURTS. So what ails the CNMI men's hoops?

MARK RABAGO
Associate Editor

Only the top 75 teams are listed in the latest FIBA men's rankings, with—predictably enough—powerhouses the U.S., Spain, and Argentina in the Top 3.

The lower rung of the rankings has the two Congos—Democratic Republic and People's Republic—and Liberia.

The CNMI men's national basketball team is not ranked and technically shares the same rankings as Guam, Palau, and Kosrae.

However, if one gauges performance based in the last couple of Micronesian Games, the CNMI men's basketball team is near the bottom of the heap in the region.

In last summer's Micro Games in Palau, for example, the Commonwealth's cagers finished dead last with a 2-4 win-loss record.

Four years earlier, the CNMI men's basketball team finished 2-1 in the elimination round in a tie with Palau and Kosrae. The hosts, however, failed to reach the Final Four after being outpointed via quotient system by the two other teams. The Commonwealth settled for fifth place.

In 2002 in Pohnpei, Team CNMI won its first game against Chuuk but proceeded to lose its last six and wound up in sixth place with a horrible 1-6 record.

So what ails the CNMI men's hoops team?

Identifying the problem

Michael A. White himself, the secretary general of the Basketball Association of the Northern Mariana Islands, concedes that the CNMI men's team continues to struggle in the Micro Games despite having the talent to do well in the regional competition.

"We're chronic underachievers in the men's side. I think we have an enormous amount of talent and there's no reason why we shouldn't be medaling every four years in the Micro Games," he said.

White, who represents the CNMI in FIBA Oceania, said the team's flaw could lie equally both in its players and coaching.

"My suspicion is there are a whole lot of breakdowns—playing and coaching. If you want to blame the coach, blame the coach. If you want to blame the players, blame the players. It takes both. It takes a coach who attracts players and for whom players want to play and it takes players with the heart and commitment to the sport to be able to play for a coach who demands a lot from them," he said.

BANMI president Elias Rangamar said there never was and still is no selection criteria and scientific approach to selecting CNMI national teams, which has contributed to its pathetic record in the past several Micro Games.

"When national teams were assembled back in the 1970s, 1980s, and until today, the system used to select players was to pick the best players in the local leagues," he said, adding that having the best players usually don't translate to having the best team.

Just for fun

The sad fact is that the current state of basketball, and for that matter a lot of the Commonwealth's team sports, is still played at the recreational level, Rangamar said.

"Just because we compete at regional and international events, we assume that we are progressing and developing into a powerhouse in our region. This is only true in the case of individual sports like swimming, tennis, and athletics but not in team sports, not yet. The current state of sports in the CNMI is a reflection of where we are as a nation in terms of our sporting culture and mentality toward sports," he said.

For Rangamar, there are a lot of factors that contribute to this lack of basketball development, and there is not one person or group that should be blamed.

"On the administrative side, there was no such thing as development plans, visions, missions, and consistency in terms of who was heading the organization. Every few years, a new president would take charge and the vision or lack thereof was not constant. In coaching, there really were not any coaching resources or mentoring program, so everything was left to the coaches," he said.

BANMI board member Abner Venus said that part of the problem stems from not having the right mix of players.

"We are not getting the right type of players. We have a lot of talent in the CNMI but most of these players are not willing to give their time to show up for the tryouts or could not stand the training," he said. "We need to go

# of Micronesia

back to our development of players and coaches and come up with a program in regards to what needs to be done in preparing the team that will be playing off-island."

A standing national team

The men's national basketball coach since 2002, however, blames the CNMI men's team's lackluster performances in past Micro Games to the absence of a standing national team.

"What ails us the most is the lack of consistency of players. We have never had a majority of the same players in the Micro Games. Players will mature, but would leave to the States for school or jobs. Now, this will not be a major factor if the consistency in teaching basic skills of basketball is done year-round," said Rufino Aguon.

Aguon echoed White and Venus' views that the CNMI has a dearth of players willing to play for the national team.

"We have a very small pool of players to choose from and from that only a handful are willing to work hard and stick to it," he lamented.

He added that BANMI should have a bigger pool of qualified coaches to teach the fundamentals of basketball at the grassroots level, "so that as the individual grows in height and strength they can realize those skills."

Off-island exposure

For New Zealand 21-and-under men's team assistant coach Kevin Smith, the problem of the islands' men's team mirrors that of the Kiwis.

"Based on both my visits to Saipan so far, it is clear that the islands suffer from many of the perils of distance faced by New Zealand. Many of the athletes and their coaches do not get the exposure to international or other highly intense competition, which is essential in building battle hardened veterans, and this experience needs to come early during their age group years so that the final step to the senior national team is not such a large one, whether it be as a coach or as a player," he said.

Smith was part of the New Zealand's coaching staff when the team competed in the 2009 FIBA Oceania Tournament on Saipan.

White seconded Smith: Playing in off-island competition usually results in going up against more superior teams, which would only make CNMI teams better.

"You don't get better by playing against players with the same ability. That's why games against the Anderson AFB Bombers are always a welcome sight. You don't get better by playing against people with the same ability or less ability, you get better by playing teams that are better than you are and learning from them," he said.

Chemistry issues

For James Lee, a player in Aguon's 2006 and 2010 teams, it's not just the lack of more off-island exposure that plagues the Team CNMI in the Micro Games.

He said team members always play hard but haven't played that long enough to build the chemistry enjoyed by rival teams like Palau, Guam, and Pohnpei, whose members have played together the past four, six, and even 10 years.

"Some of their players are still there after 10 years. There've been together so chemistry-wise they're there. Here in the CNMI, every four years we start from scratch. It would've been easier if there was program to begin with and the last six months would be spent in just tweaking the offense and defense of the team."

Lee, who is also president of the United Basketball Association, is one of only three holdovers from the 2006 CNMI men's basketball team that played in the last Micro Games. The other two are Dan Barcinas and Gus Palacios.

Selection process

One member of the CNMI men's basketball team that finished second to host Guam in the 1994 Micro Games goes a bit further when he said the problem is inherent from the very start, when BANMI selects its national team.

Ray Lizama, president of the Masters Basketball of the Northern Mariana Islands Federation and, according to him, the heart-and-soul of that silver-medal winning team, said that BANMI should select a pool of "great players" rather than hold a tryout.

More often than not, he said, the CNMI sends only its best-conditioned athletes rather than its best basketball players because those who "survive the tryouts" are typically the players who have both the time and energy to complete the rigorous training.

Not fit for hoops

FIBA Oceania secretary general Steve Smith said it best when he said the CNMI men's basketball teams always seem to be the fittest players in tournaments but fall way, way short when it comes to playing basketball as a team.

"CNMI players are fit and athletic when they present themselves for international competition and this is a compliment to the preparation of the coaches," he said.

Smith, who has visited the CNMI numerous times for clinics and tournaments, however, observed that the Commonwealth's teams lack structure and game plans. Its teams are also unused to a disciplined approach in the execution of fundamental skills. »

R_X for CNMI men's hoops

FIBA Oceania secretary general Steve Smith has the following prescription to jumpstart the Commonwealth's men's basketball program:

- Raise the number of trained and accredited coaches working with senior and junior teams in domestic competition in the CNMI.
- Form a coaches' association that meets three or four times a year to exchange ideas and coaching techniques.
- Create a culture of sharing, where coaches understand that as well as working with their club team they have the ability and the responsibility to help the CNMI achieve better international results. The work that coaches do every day with their teams is building the foundation for the performances of the national team in the future. We think coaches in the CNMI do not see their role in this light.
- Consider, as a result of a meeting of coaches, developing a national style of play, which suits the physique and skills of your potential national players.
- Look at the calendar of international events and working back from that, conduct a number of elite training camps for a squad of players drawn from various leagues and under the direction of a head coach and the best coaches from each of the leagues, to improve the skills and knowledge of your national players, before being selected in the national team.
- Invite respected coaches from Guam to Saipan to run camps for your best junior and/or senior players, so they understand what other coaches expect of their players.
- Think about using the resources of Japan, Korea, and China to bring coaches into Saipan to do the same. This could be an aid project from the governments of these countries.
- The calendar of competitions in the CNMI needs to be better coordinated, giving some consideration to creating a tiered structure of competitions from recreational to high level. This will give the best players the chance to play against the best.
- Mandate that FIBA rules are played in high level competitions in the CNMI.
- Mandate a "no-zone defenses" rule be in place for high-level competitions so that players develop their one-on-one defensive and one-on-one offensive skills.
- Have the coaches who take teams to international competition conduct a de-brief on their return with BANMI and with other coaches in the CNMI to advise them of how other teams are playing, what are the trends in the game internationally. Or what the differences are in the way the referees are blowing the game overseas compared to the CNMI.
- Have the coaches who go overseas on study assignments conduct clinics on their return to share their knowledge and expertise. Make copies of their notes and DVDs.

"The best-developed part of the CNMI game is the transition game, but generally CNMI teams are not good in the half court. Offensively, players are not convinced of the need for off-ball movement. Defensively, the ability to guard a player one-on-one without fouling is poorly developed. Your teams are not experienced enough to switch defensive tactics quickly in response to changes in the tactics of the offense," he said.

Organizational-wise, Smith said BANMI needs more coordination among the islands' various basketball programs.

"In fact we question if there is actually a feeling of belonging to CNMI basketball [as a whole] or a desire to help the national team achieve better results. It seems from our visits and conversations that the leagues and associations do not understand their role in helping to raise the standard of play, of coaching and of officiating as part of the process of enhancing the talent pool available for national coaches to work with," said Smith.

Need to coalesce

BANMI officials, and White in particular, shared some of Smith's observations.

"Essentially, we need everyone to be on the same page. BANMI doesn't need to run the UFO [United Filipino Organization basketball league], UBA, or anybody else's league. But we do all need to be on the same page in terms of organization, referee, in terms of coach certification, in terms of the things that hold the game together and make us all better players and make the sport better for everybody who participates in it, regardless of the level of skills," said White.

Ranganar, meanwhile, stressed the creation of a set of criteria to select a national team that would first identify players by position, followed by attitude, athleticism, skills, and height.

In selecting these players, coaches would also have to consider the team's style of play, along with creating an identity.

"[We need to find out whether we'll be a running team or defensive-oriented one. The best players don't necessarily mean that these players will fit or be successful at the national elite level. At present, most players in the CNMI do not have great basketball skills but rather have natural skills. If we were to select the best players, we would end up with about 80 percent guards," he said.

For Aguon, moving up the selection process for the national team from six months before the Micro Games to at least a couple of years before the quadrennial event is key.

"I would like to choose the players now and start working with them. This will create chemistry, allow us to have a team in place already to play on all on island leagues/tournaments, go off-island competitions before the Micro Games. BANMI has been very supportive and I am sure they agree with me on this. The only factor will be the players themselves being committed. A very successful coach once said winning is not everything, it's the only thing and you must work harder than rest to get there and stay there," he said.

Coaching hot seat

BANMI also must reassess how it chooses the coach for the Micro Games and for other off-island competitions, Rangamar said.

"We are currently working on conducting more clinics on- and off-island in hopes of increasing the number of coaches we have. A selection criteria for coaches is also in the works where coaches will be required to submit an application for coaching vacancies in the any of the junior national and national development squads for both men's and women's. We want to develop a network of coaches working from the grassroots level up to the national level where coaches are going to be accountable with their program," he said.

Aside from this, Rangamar said a coaching manual for the various age groups and national teams is in the process, where all coaches are mandated to use and follow.

The manual will require coaches to submit in writing a full report of the squad and team program to the coaches committee for review and presentation to the executive board. The board will then review the report, performance of the team, and make alterations for future programs.

BANMI four-year plan

According to Rangamar BANMI has also created a four-year strategic plan to develop pathways for all stakeholders of basketball that it hopes to kick off in the 2011 season.

The revival of the Micronesian Basketball Confederation following the last Micronesian Games is also a big step in the right direction, he said.

"All representatives agreed that to develop basketball in our region, conducting tournaments and competitions for various age groups would lead to improved standards at the senior level. It is our hope that our senior squads for the next Micronesian Games will come from this developmental age group participants," he said.

Rangamar also said a concept of "Mini Basketball" will be introduced in the coming year, along with developmental camps for players and coaches in the 6- to 18-year-old age groups.

"Various stages of development programs ages 6-18 will be introduced, which will be categorized in the following stages: FUNdamental stage, learning to train stage, train to train stage, train to compete stage, and finally the train to win stage. Children acquire certain skills at certain levels and they have to be progressive," he said.

White said the Mini Basketball would finally hopefully shake CNMI men's hoops out of its doldrums.

"We need to start from really the basic grassroots level. Get kids at the time they're old enough to play basketball and give them good coaching from that point moving forward. That's what separates us from Guam. That's what separates us from the rest of the Pacific and from the bigger powers of Australia and New Zealand. It's coaching and it's fundamentals that have been drilled into you from the time you were big enough to pick up the basketball. That's the way it should be," he said

With this new program and the revival of the Micronesian Basketball Tournament comes the hope that the CNMI men's hoops will finally shed its underachievers tag. TS

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Suiting up for collegiate basketball in Manila

JONATHAN PEREZ
Contributing Writer

Jericho Cruz and Will Stinett both agree that the level of competition in collegiate basketball in the Philippines is different compared to the one they were used to in the Marianas.

Cruz, who suited up for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands men's basketball team, and Stinett, who once played for Chuuk and Guam in various tournaments in the Oceania region, are lapping up all the action that Philippine collegiate basketball has to offer.

Cruz plays for the Rizal Technological University's Blue Thunders in the National Capital Region Athletic Association, an athletic association that consists of nine other colleges and universities spread out in Metro Manila.

Stinett, on the other hand, is enjoying the bright lights and media attention he is getting with the Adamson University's Soaring Falcons in the Philippines' premier collegiate league, the University Athletic Association of the Philippines—a 73-year-old sports association that includes eight of the country's premier educational institutions.

Jericho Cruz in action for the Rizal Technological University's Blue Thunders in the National Capital Region Athletic Association.
JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

"I have a lot of fun playing here. Games are more challenging and I get to compete against good players and a lot of good teams," said Cruz, who has come a long way since playing in the open court of Garapan on the island of Saipan.

Cruz also suited up for RTU when the Blue Thunders competed in the 15th Philippine University Games in Dumaguete in October and is one of the top scorers for the Mandaluyong-based cagers in the MBL Invitational basketball championship.

"Honestly, the level of competition in the Philippines is different. The support from the fans we've been getting is nothing compared when I was playing on Saipan," Cruz said. "Basketball in the Philippines is really big. It is the country's biggest sport. It is like baseball on Saipan."

Cruz said his passion and commitment to basketball further increased when he earned the chance to don RTU's Blue and Gold colors.

"I had a good basketball foundation on Saipan. My coaches taught me a good program and I just improved my skills here in Manila."

He is also thankful for the things that he learned from RTU coach Beaujing Acot. "He taught me how to manage myself and the game, and I've learned a lot from him on how to deal with the fans. I've become more mature in playing basketball with his guidance."

Though he is away from his family on Saipan, Cruz said he is enjoying being alone and independent. "It feels very different. Hard at first but you'll get used to it."

While he enjoys playing for the Blue Thunders, Cruz said he wants to pursue his dream of someday playing in the Philippine Basketball Association, Asia's first play-for-pay league.

That is why starting in the summer of 2011, he will be joining the Adamson Falcons. "But I'll get to finish the NCRAA season."

Cruz said it was Adamson coach Leo Austria who personally recruited him when the 1985 PBA Rookie of the Year saw him play in a game between the Falcons and the Blue Thunders in Dumaguete.

Cruz is expected to suit up for the Falcons in the 2012 season since he has to sit out for one year after playing for RTU in a separate league other than the UAAP.

While Cruz started his collegiate basketball career at a low-key school, Stinett was immediately thrown into the wild arena of the UAAP.

He was accidentally recruited by former Adamson mentor Bogs Adornado, who took over for the Falcons when Austria was appointed head coach of the then Welcoat Dragons in the PBA.

The Adamson coaching staff was then looking for Filipino-American players in Guam but instead caught the fancy of Stinett.

"He is a hardworking player, very intense when it comes to the game and has a strong desire to win," said Austria of Stinett. "His playing time on the court depends on the situation. He is known more as a stopper, a hardnosed defender."

Will Stinett, left, is enjoying the bright lights and media attention as a member of Adamson University's Soaring Falcons in the Philippines' premier collegiate league, the University Athletic Association of the Philippines.
KC CRUZ

Stinett said he had to adjust the way he played here since the quality of the games are much higher compared to when he was still playing at Fr. Duenas High School in Guam.

"Before, I really missed Guam. I had to adjust to a lot of things when I arrived here in Manila. The language barrier is also a problem since I don't speak Pilipino. But as time goes on, I got used to all the things here with the help of my teammates," said Stinett, who played for Chuuk as a freshman in 2002 and was part of Guam's silver medal-winning team in the 7th South Pacific Mini Games in Palau.

He was one of Adamson's reliable defenders where he helped the Falcons to a third place finish in the 73rd UAAP season. The Falcons are currently playing in the finals of the Philippine Collegiate Champions League, which the equivalent of the US NCAA Sweet 16 tournament.

They currently hold a 1-0 lead against defending champion Ateneo Blue Eagles in the best-of-three title showdown.

"It was really cool being on TV, seeing your photo and name in newspaper stories. The whole country is your audience," said Stinett, who is set to finish his business marketing course in March next year.

He has nothing but praises for Austria, whom he did not know was a popular figure in Philippine basketball. "I learned about coach Leo through stories of other people. At first I don't know why everywhere we go people would talk to him and get their photos taken with him or get his autograph. When I heard the stories of his playing days, I have nothing but respect for him. I hope I could have seen how he played."

"He is really a good coach, he teaches you to get back to the basics and fundamental elements of the game. Adamson is not a top team in the UAAP but we fought our way the entire season. He helped me adjust my role where I guard the point guards of the other team or their best scorers," said Stinett, who describes himself as a laidback person who just wants to relax on the beach.

Stinett said he plans to stay for five more years in the Philippines where he hopes to play in a semi-professional league. If not, he could always go back to Chuuk and manage their family business. TS

"I have a lot of fun playing here. Games are more challenging and I get to compete against good players and a lot of good teams."

GYMS

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CLARISSA DAVID
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

JESSIE PAGSINOHIN

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The fitness center offers different types of annual membership rates. Corporate membership for a maximum of six persons costs only $1,500. A group membership for five individuals is $1,500. The fee for family membership (2 adults and 2 children, is $1,320.

Individual membership is priced at $400 while senior citizens 60 years or older only pay $300. All types are inclusive of the use of spa and swimming pool.

ARC Fitness Center also offers a monthly membership of $45, which does not include the spa and pool facilities. A daily rate of $20 is also applicable and allows spa and pool use.

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Club Elan amenities include exercise equipment such as free weights and cardiovascular machines, indoor and outdoor Jacuzzi, a spa, sauna, steam room, cold, warm and hot plunge pools, lockers and showers, towel service, and aerobics classes.

The facility also offers the use of tennis courts and the free-form swimming pool and has the Camp Hyatt, Hyatt's private entertainment program for children ages 3 to 12 that provides youngsters with various supervised activities like swimming, tennis, and organized games.

Monthly rate for Club Elan is $220 per individual, $275 per couple, and $330 per family with additional charge of $50 per child after the third child. Club Elan also has biannual, annual, and corporate membership rates as well as short-term rates for military guests, members' guests, and day passes. Club Elan members can enjoy a 20-percent discount at i Sagua Spa, the luxurious urban spa at Hyatt Regency Saipan.

GILBERT C. ADA GYMNASIUM

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Website: www.dcca.gov.mp

Gilbert C. Ada Gymnasium is situated within the Oleai Sports Complex under the Division of Sports and Recreation of the Department of Community and Cultural Affairs.

This public sports facility caters to gym buffs who have an aversion to enforced membership fees and regulations. It offers indoor and outdoor volleyball courts, weight room, martial arts room, table tennis room, and men's and women's locker rooms for a very minimal fee but maintenance is not at par with exclusive gyms.

'S' is for Super

CATHERINE P. ANDERSON
Contributing Writer
Photography by Jessie Pagsinohin

The crimson "S" emblazoned across the chest of the Man of Steel stands for "super," of course. But is there more to this serpentinous monogram than meets the x-ray vision eye? Perhaps the mighty man of Metropolis is also a football fan extolling the five virtues of a superior player: Sense, Skill, Speed, Strength, and Sportsmanship.

Although not as young as Superman was when he first flexed his muscles and discovered his extraordinary powers, young athletes of the Northern Mariana Islands Football Association's Under 8 and Under 11 leagues are also beginning to discover their potential. And once in a while, the signs of a rising superstar flash on the field.

John Paul is hardly the fastest or the biggest player on his team, but he's showing an emerging awareness of Sense, the first football fundamental. It's the first day of the season, and for most players, adrenaline is high and skills are still raw. Excited players are having mostly knee-jerk reactions when the ball comes near them, but John Paul appears to be putting some deliberate thought into his moves, observing the positioning of both his teammates and opponents. He gets the ball and takes an extra micro-second to choose to try to lightly sidestep his opponent. Although he is not successful in this attempt, his ability to calmly and quickly assess his options is a rare sight on such a high-energy day.

Continue on page 27

CNMI youth strikers from the six football clubs have a brief game at the Oleai Sports Complex Field.

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Long-time runner Ketson "Jack" Kabiriel will be retiring from competitive racing this year. TAGA *Sports* sat down with the Safety First employee to talk about his more than two decades of running.

ROSELYN MONROYO

TAGA Sports Staff Writer

HOW DID YOU GET THE ROAD RUNNER BUNNY NAME FOR YOURSELF?

I and former *Saipan Tribune* sports reporter, Shan Seman, used to train together. He thought of the name after the battery commercial. He said I am like that battery, full of energy for a long period of time, but still needs to recharge.

WHEN DID YOU START RUNNING?

I started when I was still in grade school in Chuuk. I used to run barefoot. It was only here on Saipan in the 1980s that I started using shoes. At first, I was not used to it (shoes) and was a bit slow; I felt like my feet were too heavy. On Saipan, I started when coach Elias Rangamar saw how I ran fast during a basketball game with the Ol'Aces. I also played volleyball before and was a member of the Chuuk National Team.

IS THERE ANY RITUAL YOU DO BEFORE A RACE?

I drink a small bottle of water and pray. Pray hard that I get to finish and injury-free. When not racing, I still run, from 4:30am to 6am at Kagman 2 and then from 5:30pm to 6:30pm along Beach Road from Monday to Friday.

WHEN NOT RUNNING, WHAT DO YOU DO TO UNWIND?

I stay in my farm on Middle Road. I have local produce and use them for my family's consumption.

WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS RUNNING WITHOUT YOUR SHIRT ON?

Just like running barefoot, I feel free and lighter when I am running without my shirt on. I don't feel cold or hot. The sweat falls and I don't have to worry about a dirty shirt after the race. A pair of shorts, Saucony shoes, and a watch are all I need for every race.

YOUR MOST MEMORABLE RUN?

The Turkey Trot Run in November last year. I did not finish. I had an asthma attack on the way up Capital Hill. It was the first time I did not finish a race. I trained for more than four months for that race and it was really frustrating not to finish it. I ended up being picked up by the Emergency Management Services staff and brought to the hospital.

YOU SAID YOU WILL BE RETIRING AFTER THE SAIPAN HALF MARATHON IN MARCH, SO WHAT'S YOUR PLAN AFTER RETIREMENT?

I will be concentrating on triathlon and also in coaching young runners. I have four runners right now, including my two sons, Koen and Kevin.

YOUR DREAM RACE?

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WEDNESDAY :
SUBMISSION GRAPPLING/MMA LIVE (6PM-9PM)

THURSDAY :
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MUAY THAI TRAINING & BOXING (7PM-9PM)

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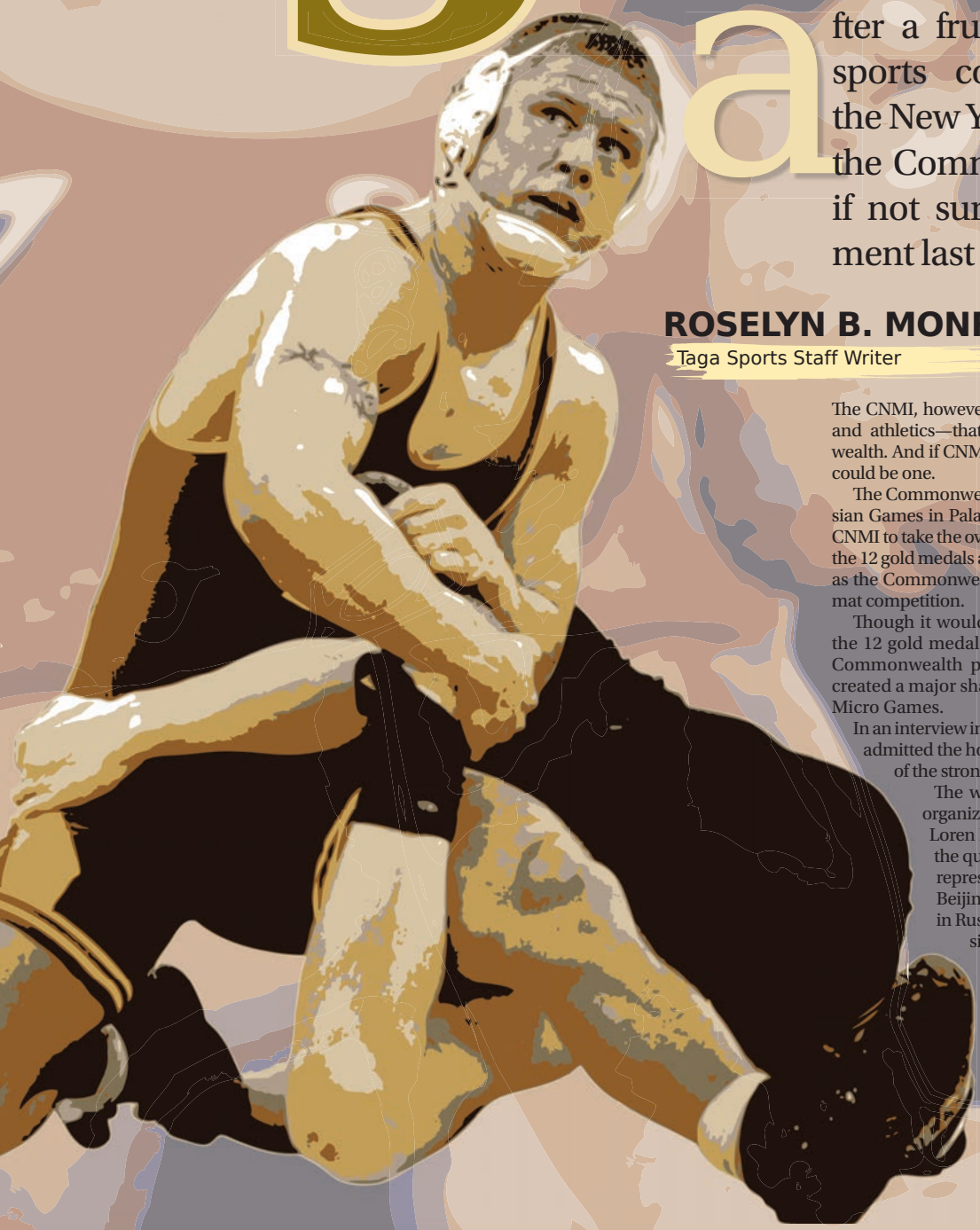
Wrestling for gold

After a fruitful 2010, the CNMI sports community welcomes the New Year with the hope that the Commonwealth will equal, if not surpass, its accomplishment last year.



ROSELYN B. MONROYO
Taga Sports Staff Writer

The CNMI, however, needs to find a sport—besides swimming and athletics—that can deliver the goods for the Commonwealth. And if CNMI is looking for another gold mine, wrestling could be one.

The Commonwealth won 44 gold medals in the 7th Micronesian Games in Palau. Palau had 10 more gold medals than the CNMI to take the overall championship. The host earned eight of the 12 gold medals at stake in wrestling against the CNMI's none, as the Commonwealth did not send even a single entry for the mat competition.

Though it would have been tough for the CNMI to sweep the 12 gold medals had it sent wrestlers to Palau last year, a Commonwealth participation in wrestling would still have created a major shakeup in the overall medal standings in the Micro Games.

In an interview in Palau, CNMI chef de mission Michael White admitted the host made a killing in wrestling, which has one of the strongest programs in Belau's sports community.

The wrestling program in Palau is so sound that organizers of last year's Micro Games gave Elgin Loren Elwais the honor of lighting the torch during the quadrennial event's opening ceremony. Elwais represented Palau in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the 2010 World Wrestling Championship in Russia, and in various competitions in Micronesia, Pacific, and Oceania.

If Palau could produce high-caliber wrestlers like Elwais, so could the CNMI.

"Wrestling is a great sport, at which the CNMI can and should excel," White said.

It is a sport where height is not often a might, where physical strength is a must, and an even playing field is almost always on hand. It is the sport where CNMI athletes' physical attributes and fighting skills learned from mixed martial arts could make a perfect marriage.

"Unfortunately, our wrestling federation

has been inactive for a number of years. I hope that those interested in developing the sport in the Northern Marianas will revitalize the federation and start training and competing," White said.

Dormant

The last time the CNMI competed in a wrestling tournament was at the 2006 Micronesian Game on Saipan.

"Wrestling was inactive after 2006 as I had no one willing to put in the hard work to train and compete," said Joe Ocampo, former president of the local wrestling association and coach of the CNMI Team in 2006. "Unlike team sports, wrestling is an individual sport where if one does not give his best there is no one to pick up the slack. Wrestling is not easy, you have to have the heart to be a wrestler because without it you won't last through the training sessions."

"The CNMI wrestling team had worked hard to build a reputation in the Pacific as a team that is willing to compete hard and not be there for a vacation. I will drop anyone who does not make the practice no matter who they are and I will not tarnish the reputation that so few have worked hard to achieve just so that one can go on vacation," added Ocampo, who won a silver medal during the Pacific Mini Games in Palau in 2002.

After the 2006 Micro Games, Ocampo and his small company of wrestlers turned to MMA and the sport that could have brought honors to the CNMI died a natural death.

Interscholastic wrestling

MMA promoter and fighter Cuki Alvarez, who was a member of the CNMI Team during the 2006 Micro Games, agrees that introducing wrestling in schools is one of the best ways to tap new talents.

"This is a great competitive sport to implement in our school system. With proper federal funding and support, and especially proper training, I am positive we can produce Pacific and Micro Games champions," Alvarez said.

He said MMA fighters and his Trench Tech promotion are willing to share their skills with students.

"Trench Tech has and always will be supportive of these kinds of programs. Back in 2006, we were very new to the wrestling scene. We had already been training in Jiu Jitsu and MMA for a couple of years by this time so that helped our transition into wrestling smoothly," Alvarez said.

White also welcomed the idea of having wrestling competitions in schools, especially in the Marianas Interscholastic Sports Organization.

"I would welcome any effort by MISO to install a wrestling program as part of its interscholastic sports program."

Off the list

MISO was established in 2007 and at present has nine sports on its calendar every school year. Wrestling is not on that list.

MISO's counterpart in Guam, the Independent Interscholastic Athletic Association of Guam, has wrestling on its annual calendar and attracts about 100 youth wrestlers, producing those who represent Guam in off-island tournaments. Olympian Maria Dunn, a graduate of Simon Sanchez High School who competed in the U.S. Women's College Nationals for the Missouri Valley Vikings, was one of them.

MISO acting president Nick Gross admitted there was a discussion about having wrestling on their calendar in the future, along with four other disciplines.

"MISO has discussed the inclusion of athletics such as American football, swimming, rugby, badminton, and wrestling, but at the present time we are focusing on strengthening the programs we have. Expanding the program at this point would only lower the quality of what we currently offer. Without additional funding, our budget just won't allow us to expand without dropping one of our current sports," Gross said.

The Public School System provides annual funding for MISO.

MEDAL TALLY

2005 Pacific Mini Games (Palau)

	G	S	B
Palau	7	1	0
Samoa	4	1	2
FSM	1	4	4
Guam	1	3	1
Marshalls	1	2	3
CNMI	0	1	0

2006 Micro Games (Saipan)

	G	S	B
Palau	4	1	1
Guam	3	2	2
Kosrae	3	1	1
Pohnpei	2	0	5
Yap	1	5	1
CNMI	1	1	3
Chuuk	0	4	4

2007 South Pacific Games (Samoa)*

	G	S	B
Samoa	6	2	4
Palau	4	2	2
FSM	3	6	1
A. Samoa	1	0	5
Solomon	0	3	1
Marshalls	0	1	1

2010 Micronesian Games (Palau)*

	G	S	B
Palau	4	2	0
Guam	1	2	0
Chuuk	1	2	2
Marshalls	1	0	1
Yap	0	1	1
Pohnpei	0	0	2
Kosrae	0	0	1

BEACH

	G	S	B
Palau	4	2	0
Guam	2	0	0
Yap	0	2	3
Pohnpei	0	1	3
Chuuk	0	1	1
Kosrae	0	0	1

* No CNMI entry

"Since our first year, our program has grown and so has the work load. In order to operate efficiently we need coaches, refs, officials, and general expenses. At present, these expenses are covered by the PSS on a year-to-year basis. If anyone would like to assist MISO with this endeavor, whether through volunteer work, coaching, officiating, or financial means, please feel free to contact us," Gross said.

The cost

Ocampo said he is willing to step up to the plate to bring wrestling to schools.

"I would love to introduce this sport into the high school level but in order to do that, schools would have to take the burden of the cost of buying a mat. The mat is the most expensive thing in wrestling. The rest is manageable and is usually left to the athlete to purchase.

A mat costs as low as $2,500 and as high as $10,000, depending on the brand and its type. In the U.S. mainland, two types of mats are commonly used: polyethylene foam and polyvinylchloride (PVC) foam.

PVC is recommended for schools competition due to its durability, which is between 10 and 15 years or more, depending on maintenance. Polyethylene foam is used for elite competitions due to its portability and lightness.

Besides the mat, other equipment needed are singlets, shoes, head protectors, knee pads, and mouth guards.

A singlet is a one-piece suit designed only for wrestling. One costs between $30 and $70. Head protectors cost between $20 and 50; shoes for $25 to $80; knee pads for $10 to $40; and mouth guard for $8 to $40.

Manufacturers of wrestling equipment accept bulk orders and give substantial discounts, especially for schools.

WRESTLING IS A GREAT SPORT, AT WHICH THE CNMI CAN AND SHOULD EXCEL.

Beach wrestling

Freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling, the two most common types of wrestling, use expensive mats for competitions.

Beach wrestling, which FILA introduced in 2004, does not. Ropes and sand are enough to hold a wrestling match. Wrestlers do not even need a singlet or shoes. A pair of Hawaiaan shorts will do. The rules, skills, and techniques are the same.

If freestyle or Greco-Roman wrestling would be a burden to organizers and wrestlers, financially, cost-less beach wrestling is a good start to get the ball rolling for the sport. Venues would not be a problem, as beaches are a few minutes away from schools and homes.

Beach wrestling was played in Palau during the Micro Games, and Samoa and the Solomon Islands began introducing it to local wrestlers a few years ago. Other island nations in the Pacific are expected to follow suit and it will not be long for this innovation to grace the Pacific Games and Mini Games. The 2012 London Olympics will have beach wrestling on its calendar.

Whether it is beach wrestling or its regular forms, Ocampo believes the sport could still be one of the great sources of pride for the CNMI.

"I have been the coach and athlete for the CNMI since the 1994 Micro Games in Guam where wrestling was first introduced. In that first year, we came back with medals and since then we have never failed to compete in either the Micro or South Pacific Games and not come back with medals for the CNMI. I am proud of our achievements and proud to have trained the athletes I have had during those games."

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Francisco Palacios 'Tan Ko'

SCOREKEEPER extraordinaire

ROSELYN B. MONROYO
TAGA Sports Staff Writer

Francisco "Tan Ko" Palacios retired from baseball scorekeeping in 2006 and the sport's recording of statistics has never been the same.

Gone were the neatly written score sheets and the perfectly aligned players and team statistics handwritten in his signature long paper sheets.

So were the genial visits to his house in Chalan Kanoa for a copy of the batting and pitching leaders, with a blow-by-blow account of a thrilling game in the Saipan Major League on the side. Since his retirement, the search for the stats, more often than not, has turned into a wild goose chase.

It has only been four years since Tan Ko sat on the five-foot long wooden chair at the press box of the field named after him and watched the CNMI beat Guam in the epic finals of the 6th Micronesian Games. However, to the baseball community, it seemed those lost years could have been worth a few more dozen pages added to the sport's record book, which has its early pages (1982 to early 2007) kept in Tan Ko's room.

Tan Ko showed TAGA *Sports* proof of the rich history of the favorite sport on the island—from the faded blue flag presented him during the first baseball league in the CNMI (1953-1954 season), to the yellowing score sheets and individual and team stats in the Mobil Games since 1988.

He started keeping baseball records in the 1950s at 17. Now at 81, his hearing may be a problem, but his memory is as keen as ever (he even remembers the middle names of notable CNMI baseball players several decades ago), taking TAGA *Sports* on a trip down memory lane.

ROSELYN MONROYO

Francisco "Tan Ko" Palacios shows off the abacus he uses to compute stats and when calculating Mt. Carmel's tithe collections.

From frustrated catcher to record-keeper

Tan Ko was one of only a few Saipan students sent to Palau during World War II to study mechanics. He left Saipan in 1943 and learned in Palau how to play baseball. In 1951, four years after returning to Saipan, he tried out for the Saipan baseball team.

"I was not good enough to make the team," said Tan Ko, who played catcher in Palau. "I have small hands."

Those small hands that failed Tan Ko were the same hands that played a crucial role in shaping CNMI baseball history, as the frustrated catcher decided to keep records of his team and later on the various competitions (including slow and fast-pitch softball) in the Commonwealth.

Before the catcher-to-scorekeeper switch, Tan Ko's love affair with sports and record-keeping started when he returned to Saipan and worked at the Naval Operation Base.

"Sailors used to receive copies of *Chicago Tribune* so I borrowed them and specifically checked the baseball statistics. I also liked boxing then," said the Yankees, Babe Ruth, and Mickey Mantle fan.

"I love Rocky Marciano, too. He holds a 49-0 record, 43 wins by knockouts with 13 of them made in the first round," the octogenarian recalled, taking no more than a minute to remember the famed boxer's record.

Tools of the trade

TAGA *Sports* visited Tan Ko at his residence one Sunday morning after his usual early morning church service.

During the interview, Tan Ko was dressed in his usual neatly pressed white polo, adorned with a wooden crucifix necklace, and a pair of brown pants. When he was still doing the baseball stats, he often wore a white T-shirt tucked into his well-pressed pants and a pair of shoes—a stark contrast to those who come to the press box in shorts, slippers, and dark T-shirt or sometimes no shirt at all.

Tan Ko sat on one of the wooden chairs under a makeshift canopy in his lawn during the interview with his two daughters and a couple of grandchildren and great grandchildren present, and showed TAGA *Sports* old copies of statistics and score sheets and the things he used to make these records.

One of them is an abacus. Yes, that ancient calculating tool used primarily in parts of Asia for performing arithmetic operations. The more than 20-year-old tool is still in one piece, with the brown wooden frame intact and the off white beads and rods working.

"I lost the first one (abacus), so I bought a new one more than 20 years ago," said Tan Ko, who demonstrated to his grandchildren and great grandchildren how to use the tool; they just shook their heads, smiling.

Tan Ko said he uses the same tool when calculating the church (Mt. Carmel)'s tithe collections.

"A few years back when he was still doing the stats, we asked him if he wanted a computer as a gift. He said no," said Ruth Ann Sakisat, one of Tan Ko's granddaughters.

Tan Ko used his trusted abacus together with a ruler, pen, long paper sheets, and a wooden clipboard for more than 50 years and no high-tech equipment can surpass or even equal

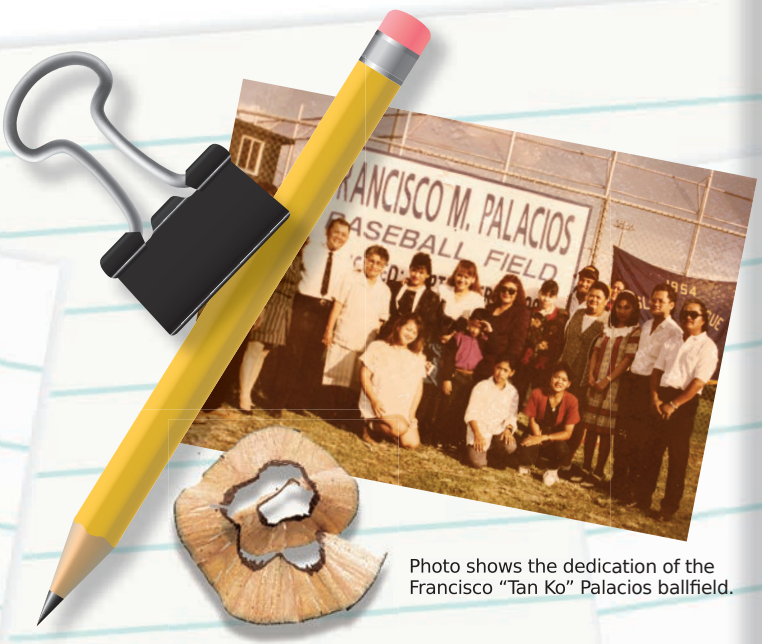


Photo shows the dedication of the Francisco "Tan Ko" Palacios ballfield.

the way he gave life to CNMI baseball through his dedicated stats keeping.

Life around church, family, and baseball

Tan Ko's life revolves around these three touchstones: Baseball, church, and work. He has no doubts, however, as to which of these three comes first.

"Church first," he said.

He was already a regular visitor of Mt. Carmel Church in the late 1970s when his friend, Bishop Tomas Aguon Camacho, first asked him to join the church's ministry. Thirty years later, he still keeps the same routine. Bishop Camacho already retired last year, but not Tan Ko, who until now keeps records of the church's tithe collection after each Mass.

"His day starts at as early as 3am. He goes to church, opens the office, and visits grandma's grave before coming home for lunch. He then returns to church in the afternoon and then visit grandma again," said A. J. Palacios, another Tan Ko grandson.

"Grandma," of course, is Rufina Demapan Palacios, whom Tan Ko married in 1948 when he was 19. The more 40-year-old union produced 14 children and several dozens of grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Rufina died in 1997 and since then Tan Ko has included in his routine the twice-a-day visit to his wife's grave. Rufina was a childhood sweetheart, having been his classmate from first to fifth grade.

"He always brings flowers when he visits her grave," A. J. Palacios added.

Tan Ko, who still drives himself to church every day and reads newspapers and watches TV when at home and there is no church service, said balancing his family life with work, church, and baseball was made easy by his understanding and supportive wife.

He also had his children watching his back and understanding why dad had to stay late in the field for a game or why he had to spend several hours at home meticulously recording the match's stats.

Watching their dad take the game's stats and bring home sheets of papers through the years, it was no surprise that his sons and even grandsons learned the art of scorekeeping. Rep. Raymond Palacios and Frank Palacios learned what their dad does best, and so has Tan Ko's grandchildren, A. J. Palacios and Vince Sablan.

"Our dad sacrificed a lot of family time for baseball. He wanted to make sure that records of players will be there for the future generations to look up to. We, his children, understand his love for the game and we felt the sacrifice he made is worthwhile," states an excerpt from a speech delivered by one of Tan Ko's children during the dedication ceremony for the Francisco "Tan Ko" Palacios Ballfield in 1994.

Honor for others

Tan Ko's home is adorned with the various plaques, trophies, and other hardware he had received through the years from both the sports and local communities.

His children and great grandchildren took them out for a photo shoot, but Tan Ko seemed uncomfortable bragging about the fruits of his labor. Instead, during the last part of the interview, he checked under those plaques, looking for pieces of papers.

Tan Ko eventually found them and the statistician in him was still evident, as he showed TAGA *Sports* the names and statistics of three players written on Post-It notes.

The CNMI Sports Hall of Famer hopes the three—Tony Indalecio Celis, Reno Celis, and Chris Nelson—will someday be recognized, along with the early CNMI baseball players for their outstanding performances in the field.

For Tan Ko, this is the essence of keeping records: to give credit where it is due. TS

From Page 20

On defense, he has more luck. He gets the ball and immediately dribbles left, away from the attackers and his fellow defender who still appear to be gathering their thoughts. He dribbles across the front of his own goal, usually a big no-no in the game due to the danger of attack, but he moves with confidence and swiftness into open space. "You're OK, John Paul!" his coach assures him as he makes his move. Quickly in the clear, John Paul comfortably makes a long clearance kick down the field.

Alex is a sturdy looking fellow who moves with much confidence on the field for his age, demonstrating a strong sense of Skill. He cuts the ball deftly around a defender and takes a shot from the corner of the penalty box. Except for the keen attention of the goalkeeper, the strong, well-placed shot would've easily hit the back of the net. The delicate balance of a well-planted foot and precise ball contact with his kicking foot serve him well through the game.

But despite his obvious talent, he declines to play a one-man game and engages his teammates throughout the match. He passes the ball and runs forward, seeking the 1-2 return pass by calling out or gesturing with his hands. On another play, he makes a cross from the corner to the top of the penalty box where a strategically placed teammate receives the ball and takes a shot on goal. Throughout the game, Alex's eyes widened in apparent eager anticipation of the play he is unfolding. He makes what many other players still struggle with look easy.

U8 is a fun and unpredictable game, as frantic stabbing at the ball is highlighted by moments of pure and sweet football when plays actually develop. One such flash of greatness is John who—like a bolt of lightening—brings Speed to the game. One, two, three and more times, he makes a breakaway with the ball, tearing up the field from even his own defensive third of the field on his way to the goal. Once he takes off, no one seems prepared to try to keep up, and he makes good headway each time. It's only when the ball gets ahead of him or a defensive player makes a timely step in that he can be stopped. Like a snugly-uniformed professional, he plays with his too-large penny tied tightly behind his back, no doubt aiding his aerodynamics.

Christopher is among the tallest players on the pitch in his game, and his black t-shirt adds to his imposing figure as he protects the goal. Watch him take a goal kick, and it's obvious he's working with a bit more Strength than most. Almost every time, his goal kicks soar to the centerline, much farther than kicks from most keepers his age. He seems to also be mastering the knack of using his body, in general. He shows no hesitation in attacking the ball when it comes toward his goal. On one such another attack, he first moves forward, than moves deftly back as the striker approaches. The ball is shot at close range, but Christopher makes an easy save and appears completely unruffled as he quickly sends the ball back up the field.

No rising star is complete without Sportsmanship, and Nicky has it. She shakes hands with the captain of the opposing team at the coin toss even before the match starts. Accidents do happen on the field, but when she trips an opponent and causes them to fall down she apologizes and helps them up. Both teams end the game without a single caution or ejection, earning Nicky's team a Green Card honor from the referee for playing clean.

Youth players chase the ball during a brief scrimmage at the Oleai Sports Complex Field.

There's a little bit of hero in everyone, and sports are just one avenue for youth to discover that hero. Given the right opportunity and training, a player who encompasses Sense, Skill, Speed, Strength, and Sportsmanship could go on to become a top player.

But for now, most of these young players on the field are on a mission to attain that final component of football so important for youth: Fun.

And by the looks of it, not even Kryptonite could stop them. TS

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